

# YOMTOV, VOL. I, # 20 - THE STUDENTS OF RABBI AKIVA

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

Now that we know what an Omer is, what does it have to do with counting?

The Gemora in the tractate of Yevamos 62b, tells us that "Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students...and all of them died in one period of time because they did not conduct themselves with respect towards one another...they all died between Pesach and Shavuos...and they all died a terrible death. What was that it? R' Nachman said "As'kerah" (a death from suffocating, from a croup-like illness). "

The Aruch HaShulchan says that " these days between Pesach and Shavu'os are established by all of Israel as days of judgement and mourning, because in this short period of time, the students of Rabbi Akiva died. Furthermore, in the past, we have seen that the main fulfillment of decrees against us in Germany and France took place during this time period, and ..." therefore, the Aruch HaShulchan says, we have the custom to maintain certain practices associated with mourning.

The Iyun Yaakov, a commentator on the Talmud, adds some insights as to what happened with the students of R' Akiva, and why they were punished so harshly. He comments that we find that there are times when a great sage and scholar is taken from us, as an atonement for the generation. How does the passing of a great sage an atonement for the generation? The atonement is not automatic. Rather, the passing of a giant is to be an inspiration for the whole generation to take note of their deeds, and see if improvement or modification is necessary. The passing of a great sage is meant to grip the nation, to cause them to note "If such a great sage can be taken from this earth, a sage whose deeds were better than mine, who commitment to G-d and His commanments was firmer than mine, who knowledge of Torah was more vast than mine, a fortiore I can be taken from this earth at any time." The re-awakening will inspire the nation to repent, thereby acheiving atonement. This, the Zohar says, is comparable to the practice of blood-letting, where a small amount of blood is drawn from one part of the body so that the whole body will heal and become healthy.

This could have happened in the time of Rabbi Akiva's students. The students of Rabbi Akiva were the greatest sages of that generation. The Gemora in Yevamos says that the world was desolate and deviod of such scholarship and Torah knowledge after the students died. These students were not merely students of one of the great sages of the time: they were great sages in their own right as well. Therefore, as soon as the first of the students passed away, all the other students should have been alarmed: A great sage died! The students should have realized that they, just as their colleague, could be taken from this earth. This should have inspired the students to engage in

introspection, to determine where improvement was needed, and to act on the inspiration of the moment. However, the very flaw which they were being warned to repair prevented them from taking any inspiration. The students, as the Gemora tells us, did not treat each other with respect. Because they did not treat each other with respect, no one student viewed any other student as "anything great." Because they did not accord each other respect, when the first student died, the others did not gain any inspiration, as they did not acknowledge the greatness of their comrade, and hence did not make the a fortiore as to their own mortality. The students, therefore, did not refine their character and did not start treating each other with respect. The students, therefore, caused their own death. Because of their failure to accord respect, not only were the students punished, but they passed up an opportunity to repent for this flaw. The students, therefore, truly died "because they did not conduct themselves with respect for one another."

The Maharsha explains that they died because we know the pasuk says "Ki hu chayecha..." "Because it (Torah) is your life, and that which lengthens your days..." The students of Rabbi Akiva, could not have this verse apply to them, as the lack of respect to another Torah scholar who was their friend indicated that there was Torah lacking among them. Therefore, they lost their life and their "long days." The lesson that we learn from the students of Rabbi Akiva is one that we must carry with us. We see how important it is to act towards one another with respect. We see how important it is not to let our own personal feelings cancel out an opportunity for inspiration. We have to remember that we must take inspiration from tragedy. Even now, years after the students of Rabbi Akiva died, we must be "inspired" by their death.

Check out all of the posts on the Omer! Head over to <http://www.torah.org/learning/yomtov> to find the newly redesigned YomTov Home Page, and click on the holiday you are interested in to find all of the archived posts on that topic.

---

For questions, comments, and topic requests, please write to [Rabbi Yehudah Prero](#).

---